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Approve CAFTA

Congress has a genuine opportunity to help solidify the fragile foundations of democracy and the rule of law, both of which have sprouted throughout Central America and the Caribbean in recent years following decades of tumult, revolution and civil war. Congressional approval of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) would be in best economic and political interests of the region's evolving democracies, and America's interests. Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick, who negotiated the trade agreement as U.S. trade representative during President Bush's first term, has rightly characterized the pact a win-win deal.

While CAFTA may not be the panacea that successfully addresses all of the region's tough challenges, their solutions are hard to imagine in the absence of this trade pact. Rejecting this forward-looking deal, which represents the next developmental step in a process that began with President Reagan's 1983 Caribbean Basin Initiative, risks compounding and exacerbating the real and difficult challenges that confront America's friends in Latin America, where political and economic destabilization already threaten Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and other fragile polities.

The free-trade deal involves Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic. It is difficult to overemphasize the strategic importance of these nations during the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. LBJ dispatched U.S. military forces to the Dominican Republic in 1965; Guatemala was immersed in a decades-long civil war; Nicaragua became a Soviet beachhead in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Crises in El Salvador and Honduras during the 1980s commanded the foreign-policy attention of the Reagan administration. Although the Caribbean nations of Grenada and Haiti, are not now direct participants CAFTA, it is worth noting that the United States felt compelled to dispatch military forces to both nations in the past quarter century. Clearly, helping the CAFTA nations and their neighbors to develop economically in the 21st century would go a long way toward preventing the repetition of the region's political, military and economic problems during much of the postwar period.

CAFTA also represents the logical next step after the 1994 implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) among Mexico, Canada and the United States. Many of CAFTA's opponents favored rejecting NAFTA as well. At the time NAFTA was signed, they predicted a "giant sucking sound" would steer millions of U.S. jobs to Mexico. In the aggregate, however, U.S. nonfarm payroll employment has increased by 19 percent since NAFTA went into effect. CAFTA would not only be a win-win pact if passed. It would be lose-lose deal if rejected.